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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between mothers' recollections of those who cared for them during their childhood and mothers' ability to cope with the daily stress of being a single parent living in poverty. Subjects were 52 low-income, single mothers of preschool-age children. Mothers' recollections of caregiving were assessed by means of a structured interview. Mothers' perceptions of their ability to cope successfully with the stress of childrearing was assessed by means of rating scales and a daily diary, which the mothers kept for 2 weeks after the interview. Mothers' perceptions of their ability to cope was significantly related to their recollections of the quality of their relationships with their parents during their own childhood. Mothers who described maltreatment by their caregivers and mothers who experienced high rates of other negative childhood stressors tended to report more unsuccessful attempts to cope with child stress and espoused less confidence in their parenting abilities than did other mothers. Appended are four references and related materials. (Author/GLR)

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Intergenerational Correlates of Daily Coping Behavior in Single-parent Mothers of Young Children

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine associations between mother's recollections of their childhood caregiving relationships and their current ability to cope with daily child stressors. Subjects were 52 low-income single parent mothers of preschool age children. Recollections of caregiving were assessed using a structured interview. Perceived ability to cope successfully with current child stressors, assessed using a two-week daily diary and rating scales, was significantly related to mother's recollections of the quality of their childhood parenting relationships. Mothers who described being maltreated by their own caregivers, as well as those who experienced high rates of other negative childhood stressors, tended to report more unsuccessful attempts to cope with child stress and espoused less confidence in their parenting abilities than others.

The current study focused on sources of child related stress in the lives of low-income single-parent mothers of young children, a chronically stressed and rapidly growing population. Our interest was in understanding factors which mediate the process of coping with daily, child related stressors. Work by McLoyd (1990) and others in the area of parenting under the chronic stress of poverty suggests that coping is mediated indirectly by a variety of factors, such as varying levels of psychological well-being, rather than being solely the direct result of discrete life experiences. One of these indirect variables, suggested by the work of George and Solomon (1989), is the mother's perception of her ability to parent effectively. This ability may be influenced by mothers' recollections of their own childhood caretaking experiences (Crowell & Feldman, 1988; Main, 1984).

Work by George and Solomon (1989) suggests that current parental functioning is indirectly related to recollections of childhood caregivers through internal working models of parenting. These models, which grow out of childhood experiences of primary caregivers, help structure not only mothers' current perceptions of their children's behavior, but also confidence in their ability to deal effectively with their children. The purposes of the current study were to: 1) identify sources of psychological stress which may mediate coping with single parenthood under the chronic stress of

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poverty, 2) assess whether mothers' memories of parental role models relate to current views of themselves as parents, and 3) examine the relationship between mothers' recollections of their childhood caregiving relationships and their perceptions of their children's current behavioral functioning.

Method

Subjects: Subjects were 52 low-income, single-parent mothers of preschool age children. All were over 20 years of age ($\bar{x}$=30) and had been single for a least one year. Mothers were paid for their participation.

Procedures: Each mother was visited twice in her home (two-week interval between visits) by trained women interviewers. The following measures were used:

1) Maternal History Interview: Each mother was given an open-ended interview about her childhood relationships with primary caregivers. Responses were coded by 2 and 3-point rating scales developed to describe the following elements of mother's recollections: 1) an overall appraisal of their childhood and family life from the mother's point of view; 2) mothers' overall perceptions of caring received from each primary caregiver; 3) the severity of discipline used by each caretaker; and 4) the degree of control exercised by each caretaker. Total numbers of positive and negative life events were also coded from the interview. Interrater reliability, calculated for each rating scale using percentage of agreement bewteen two independent raters, exceeded 70% for all scales (mean=82%).

2) Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist: This 118 item behavior problem checklist was administered in order to achieve an index of maternal perceptions of child deviance.

3) Daily Stress Diary: Mother's perceived competence in the face of daily stress was assessed using a daily diary, kept during the two weeks separating the interviews. Mothers were asked to record stresses that occurred each day, to identify and rate the intensity of their negative affect in response to each stressful situation, and finally, to record how they tried to handle each situation as well as how satisfactorally the situation was resolved.

4) Weinraub and Wolf Coping Scale: Mothers were asked to rate their perceived competence in coping with child care issues on a 5-point scale. This scale was administered during both interviews; an average of the two ratings was used in data analysis.

5) Beck Depression Inventory: Finally, in order to obtain a standardized measure of depressive symptoms, mothers completed the Beck Depression Inventory during both interviews. These scores were averaged across the two assessment points.

Results

As shown in Table 1, mothers who reported relatively high levels of success in handling child stressors (diary measure) tended to have more positive perceptions of their childhood caregivers and tended to report fewer negative childhood stress events than others. In addition, mothers who reported more negative stressful events occuring in their childhood and retained memories of harsher discipline by their own mothers percieved themselves as less effective in coping with child care issues (rating scale measure) than others. They were also likely to have higher scores on the BDI . Furthermore, mothers who reported being physically abused during childhood tended to report less successful handling of daily child-related stressors than other women in the sample.

Measures of mother's recollections of caregivers were relatively poor predictors of their perceptions of their child's adjustment on the Achenbach CBCL. However, behavior problem scores were related to how mothers perceived their coping ability. Mothers who rated their children as behaviorally deviant on the CBCL tended to perceive themselves as less effective in coping with child stressors than others ($r = -.33$, $p<.05$). They also reported a higher level of negative affect in response to daily child stress than others.

Conclusions

Although all relationships were modest, the results are consistent with research on internal working models (Crowell & Feldman, 1988; Main, 1984; George & Solomon, 1989) and parental coping with poverty (McLoyd, 1990). They suggest that there are intermediate cognitive and emotional variables which, taken together, relate to mothers' daily coping with child-related stress. Mothers who recalled their childhood in negative terms and who described the discipline they received from their primary caretaker as being harsh and punitive tended to report few successes in dealing with their own children. In addition, mothers who were frankly abused or otherwise harshly dealt with reported lower feelings of parental efficacy than others. Thus, these negative recollections may impact levels of confidence in self as a parent.

Although there was no direct link between specific negative experiences in the mothers' histories and ratings of current child behavior problems, higher behavior problem scores were somewhat related to low feelings of efficacy as a parent. Although modest, these findings suggest an indirect link between child behavior problems and maternal recollections of their caregiving, mediated by perceptions of efficacy in coping with child stressors. This type of self-generated stress further increases the already heavy burden of chronic stress that impoverished single parents experience.

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TABLE 1

Correlations Between Assessment of Childhood Caregiving and Measures of Present Coping

	Child Behavior Problem Score	% successful Coping	Coping Scale Score	Level of Neg. Affect	BDI Score
Life Events:					
1.# pos.events	-.23*	.03	.18	.13	-.13
2.# neg.events	.27*	-.40*	-.27*	.13	.14
3.overall appraisal of childhood	.18	-.28*	-.24	-.06	.38***
4.experience of physical abuse	-.12	-.47***	.13	.05	.14
Discipline Memories:					
5.mother's discipline	.27*	-.03	-.39**	.06	.33**
6. father's discipline	.06	-.13	-.03	-.05	.20
Affection Memories:					
7. mother's caring	.06	-.23	-.23	-.19	.20
8. father caring	-.01	-.11	-.14	-.17	.25

*p<.05
**p<.01
***p<.001

TABLE 2

Variance In Mothers' Coping Explained by Recollective Variables

	Child Behavior Problem Score	% successful Coping	Coping Scale Score	Level of Neg. Affect	BDI Score
Life Events:					
1.# pos.events	.07	.01	.00	.00	.01
2.# neg.events	.00	.20*	.00	.00	.01
3.overall appraisal of childhood	.00	.05*	.01	.01	.12
4.experience of physical abuse	.05	.05*	.03	.00	.01
Discipline Memories:					
5.mother's discipline	.07	.01	09	.01	.02
6. father's discipline	.00	.02	.00	.00	.03
Affection Memories					
7. mother's caring	.03	.01	.02	.00	.00
8. father caring	.00	.02	.09	.00	.01
Total R	.22	.37	.24	.02	.21

*p<.05